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Michael Jennings and minority hiring in the Fairbanks Police Department

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Series: Potlatch series

1976

Jeff Kennedy said in mid- April the Fairbanks National Organization for Women, the Fairbanks National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Fairbanks Native Association drew up an agreement with the city of Fairbanks. According to the agreement the city would hire more women, Blacks and Natives by June 1 of this year. Michael Jennings from the Fairbanks Native Association talked about how the agreement came about. He said that J.P. Jones spearheaded everything. Jones had been concerned about police harassment and not enough Blacks on the police force. Michael said they concurred with the amount of trouble on Second Avenue and the lack of minorities and women on the police force. Jennings said he sat in on some of the mediations which originally took place with the police chief Wolf. He wasn't totally unaccepting but they wanted a sealed agreement and not just his word. The Department of Justice Community Relations Branch was contacted and came to mediate a formal agreement. They are a federal government organization. They wanted to alleviate any potential volatile incidents. They came up as a third party to mediate. The agreement calls for taking a look at the testing patterns to see if they discriminate overtly or inadvertently against minorities and women. It calls for five police officers to be funded under state LEAA funds by June 1, 1976. It also calls for local participation in training in terms of culture, linguistic, and social elements. There are other related issues in terms of continuation and funding.

Jeff Kennedy asked about the testing program. He asked how they discriminate against minorities and women. Michael Jennings said in terms of Native American people there may be a question about something that has no meaning to them. He said the questions may not be relevant. Jeff Kennedy said somebody who has had similar experience to the test makers would do better on the test. Jennings said at least they can have someone looking at the test who was familiar with the area and the cultures of the area. Kennedy asked about Natives working for the police force and being looked upon as a traitor to their culture. Jennings said he would ask the person making this comment if he is looked upon in the same light. He thinks having minorities on Second Avenue would lessen the degree of tension. A Black officer may be able to deal with Black people having an argument better a white officer and the same is true with Native people. Kennedy asked if a Native officer would have to be sent out every time there was a situation with a Native. Jennings said not necessarily. Through association with Natives on the police force other police officers would know how to handle situations more appropriately. Kennedy asked what is being done now that is wrong. Jennings said he thinks that they are fairly insensitive to cultural and linguistic differences. He observed a police officer trying to arrest an Eskimo gentlemen. The police officer thought he was drunk because he couldn't understand the man. The elderly man had a problem with English. He spoke a combination of the two languages. The officer couldn't understand the man. He said people make gross assumptions and make stereotypes of minorities. He said by including

the differences in the testing and training they will learn to deal with those sorts of situations. Kennedy asked if police officers are prejudiced. Jennings said police officers are just people.

Song

Jeff Kennedy asked if recruitment will be different now. Jennings said they think by placing block ads in the newspaper or job ads people that already have a job might consider working in a position in the police department. The police department is establishing a community relations branch. A Black officer on the police force is going to be assigned to recruit minorities. Hopefully he will become the division coordinator who will become the community relations director. He is well known and well liked in the community. By having him on board and having him help with the recruitment processes. The city has been sending them circulars for a number of years. He was concerned about getting his people through the tests without prepping. He thinks this can be done.

Jeff Kennedy asked how they are going to get people want to be police officers. Jennings said they would be doing some educational things throughout the community such as the high school and UA to instill the idea in the Native community. This is one way to work on the betterment of natives in the urban areas.

Jeff Kennedy asked what the status of policemen were in the Native community. Jennings said most things are experienced based. What they see on Second Avenue will depend on the police officer they come in contact with. He thinks right now young people don't see it as a very attractive job.

Jeff Kennedy asked if it would attract people from the Bush? Jennings said the police department is very regimented and bureaucratic. He doesn't think that will be as much of a problem as people anticipate. He talked about the training of a rookie police officer. Like anything else it will be new and it is an educational process.

Song

Jeff Kennedy asked about standards required of a police officer. Jennings said to be on the Fairbanks Police Department a candidate must have a GED or a high school diploma. Jennings said their high school graduation rate has gradually increased over the years. The number of people coming back for a GED is increasing. He said they have to find people from the community who have a sincere desire to be police officers. If they can find those people they can overcome any shortcomings in the qualifications.

Kennedy asked if he knew of any Native people who would like to be police officers. Jennings said that he is scheduled to talk with a few people who have expressed an interest in the job. Kennedy asked if it wouldn't be easier for a Native person who wants a job to just go up and work on the pipeline instead of applying to be a policeman. He said it has been in the past but the pipeline is deescalating. There are going to be a lot of unemployed people. Within the agreement they asked that pipeline security experience be considered in the same vein as previous law enforcement or military service. The local police aren't being paid that badly now.

Jeff Kennedy asked how a police job in Fairbanks compare to a job in a Native corporation. Jennings said some of the pay isn't that great in non-profits such as FNA and there isn't any stability. Doyon is a profit making shareholder corporation. There is a shortage of Native people formally trained at a post high school level to work in either of those corporations. They get people with demonstrated talents and abilities and send them for education.

Kennedy asked if there is a Native way of dealing with someone who is drunk or in a fight. Jennings said there are different cultural views how that is handled. The point is a great deal of discretion is left up to the patrolman. The policeman's interpretation of the potential danger to people or property is his decision. There are several ways he can handle that. He may be able to talk to them. There may be subtle ways to cool down a situation.

Kennedy asked if he has advice for Native organizations in other cities about getting more Native people on their police force. Jennings said he would like to speak to the Native organizations and try to instill in them that by having more minorities on the police force that they are going to better serve the Native community, the minority community and the white community as well. He hopes the other communities would work for a document similar to what they have. He sees it as a two idea precedent. The coalition that was formed was unique. He is very pleased with the city administration in Fairbanks that agreed and concur to work towards some sort of equitable staffing patterns within the community and hope to work on to get documents for rest of their departments.

Discrimination in law enforcement.